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The National Presbyterian Church

The Danger of Perfectionism
(The Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds)

Matthew 13:24-30

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In our sermons through spring and summer we are looking together at Jesus' stories that he calls the parables. Stories which at times clarify spiritual truth, like an object lesson. As if to say "So here's the spiritual truth, here's the illustration," and people go "Ah, now I understand it more clearly than I did before." That's how Jesus' stories work sometimes, but not always. That is, when Jesus tells a parable the spiritual truth isn't always more clear afterward than it was to begin with. There are times, in fact, when Jesus tells a story and the crowds, including his closest followers, scratch their heads, as if to say, "I just don't get it. I don't know what you're saying, Jesus. Please help us out, please explain." And so Jesus does. Sometimes when Jesus teaches his stories he wants us to probe further, to dig into a spiritual truth that seems vague or impractical, and then enter into a discussion with him that continues long after the story is told. So the story becomes a vehicle for prayer and relationship, as much if not more than for clear answers.

We find this happening in a number of the parables. A couple of weeks ago, for example, we looked at the story in Matthew 13 that we call "the parable of the sower" [or of the soils or of the seeds]. And in that story Jesus, when Jesus tells it, the disciples scratch their heads and they say "Jesus, explain it to us," and Jesus does.

And this is the case too with the story we heard in the scripture reading just a moment or two ago. We call it "the parable of the weeds and the wheat," or "the wheat and the tares" (as the old King James version has it). And the story goes like this.

There is a farmer (once again) and there is a field and there is seed. And the farmer scatters the seed in the field during the daytime, but at night time an enemy comes and sows some other seed, some bad seed, in the field. And nobody knows that this has happened until the seed begins to grow. And as it grows the slaves of the owner (the farmer) begin to notice that the field isn't just filled with wheat. It's filled with other plants, weeds, as well. And they don't know where the weeds have come from.

And they go to the master and they say, "*Master look at the field. Where did this bad stuff come from? What do you want us to do? Do you want us to go into that field, snatch out the weeds, the fruit of the bad seed, so that the good stuff, the wheat can survive?*"

And the master responds. He says "*NO! Don't do that. An enemy came and sowed this seed. But you are not going to fix it now; we'll wait until the harvest comes. The harvest is coming, and when it comes that will be the time to fix it all. In fact, in the mean time, if you try to fix it all*

now, you will do more harm than good: you will hurt the good seed along with the bad seed – the wheat along with the weeds.”

So that’s the story that Jesus tells but his followers, and they don’t get it. They say “Well it’s a nice story, Jesus, but we don’t understand what you are trying to teach us.” So Jesus in the second part of our scripture reading goes on to explain. And what he explains is this.

- This is a story about the world in which we live. The field is the world in which live.
- And it’s a world in which there is good and evil. There are good and evil people and by extension there are good and evil ideas and there are good and evil communities and groups of people.
- This is a world in which we live, in which good and evil are all mixed up together, all of it living side by side.
- It’s a story, says Jesus, about where this evil comes from.
- It’s a story which tells that in the end this evil is going to be dealt with.
- And it’s a story which tells us about what we are supposed to do in the mean time.

Where this evil comes from; how it is going to end; and what we are supposed to do in the mean time in the world which is filled with a mixture of good and evil

Well Jesus’ explanation to the disciples address this particular set of questions, but does so without going into much detail.

In the parables Jesus gives some answers but he doesn’t intend to give all the answers. Often, Jesus’ parables are like teasing tales which give us just a hint of the answer and force us to continue the dialogue with Jesus, enter into prayer with Jesus, long after the story is told because what Jesus wants for us is not just to have all the answers to everything in the world, but to have a substantive relationship with him which sees us through life, in which we wrestle with all the questions of life side by side with him all the way through our journey together.

So Jesus touches on the answers, not answering them in detail but giving us a beginning, a place to start.

And this is the case when he deals with that first question – where does evil come from? What does Jesus say to this by way of response? He says “Well, it comes from the devil! That’s where it comes from.” But (perhaps frustratingly!) he doesn’t explain to us where the devil comes from! He says it comes from the devil: “An enemy – the devil – came by night and sowed this bad seed in the field.” No explanation of the origin of evil or the origin of the devil but there is absolutely no doubt that the Jesus we read of in the pages of Holy Scripture believed that evil was real, and personal, and that it was embodied in some kind of a being to whom we give the name the devil, or Satan, or Beelzebub. One who has a malevolent interest in this world, and is at war with God. And we poor human beings find ourselves in this mixed up world caught in the battle.

- Jesus himself was caught in this battle. We see the struggle going on as we read through the gospels. The struggle is there both at the beginning and at the end. There are two places where the struggle between Jesus and the evil one, the devil, are most prominent.
At the beginning Jesus is tempted, we are told, by the devil for 40 days, driven into the desert, into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil (Matthew 4, Luke 4). And it’s a struggle, it’s a fight. And it looks as if Jesus might lose. He is hungry, he is tired, he is worn out. But what we read in the Gospels is that Jesus wins the battle. The stakes are

high! If he loses, he's no longer "the sinless Son of God" who can die for our sins. But if he wins, this is what he can and must do – and he wins! He wins this struggle. He's in the struggle, it's personal, and he wins this struggle.

And the struggle continues throughout the gospels' story.

And it's at the end of the story that the struggle reaches another climax when Jesus' is driven to his death. At that point, it looks for all the world as if the force of evil wins – drives this good man, this sinless man Jesus to die on the cross. And you almost can hear the devil's triumphant cry as Jesus dies: "I win, I win, you lose, you lose." But then Easter comes, and God says "Wrong! I win!" Jesus overcomes the power of death and evil by rising from the dead.

For Jesus the devil is real and part of this parable says that to us: there is an enemy sowing bad seed among the good seed. You may not know it or believe it, (it happens "at night") but it is there and it is real. And then he adds "it's going to come to an end."

And that's the second issue which comes to us through this parable. What will the end be? Will good win? Will evil win? There's a struggle. How's it going to turn out in the end?

And Jesus says "*it's going to be okay. It really is. It's going to be okay. This is what you need to know: that in this mixed up world, in the end it is going to be okay. There will come,*" he says in the story, "*a harvest day, there will come a judgment.*" And that judgment, first of all and ultimately, will not be about you or me, or about our eternal destination, but will be about God's decision and use of power to bring evil to an absolute end. A day of reckoning where evil will have had its day, and it will be gone. And so this news about judgment is good news! Indeed, the good news on which our lives can depend.

Sometimes, in fact, much of the time, it looks to us as if evil is going to win, as if we are going to come into its grip, and there is nothing that we can do. Scripture tells us (James 4:7) to "resist the devil and he will flee," that his days are numbered, and that God and good are stronger than every force of evil and in this struggle, this battle, we can know God's protection.

This is the story that many of us know in our lives by experience: this battle between good and evil. But it's also a story that I believe every human being knows. It's almost as if it's written into our DNA, and even those who are secular find themselves telling this kind of a story, whether in the movies we watch, or the stories we read.

Think for example of Harry Potter – it's exciting! We are drawn into it, as if we cannot escape the struggle between good and evil, especially where it looks as if we, the good, are going to lose! We're on the edge, but in the end, by the skin of its teeth, good wins, good triumphs. It's a risky business in the middle. It looks as if it may not happen, but good triumphs in the end.

And isn't this what we all long for, deep within our hearts, our souls? Whether we're believers or not, everybody longs for and pursues this day where there will be no more evil, where there will be no more terrorists, when there will be no more cancer, when there will be no more tears. As if that day *just might be possible* in a world in which at first it seems inconceivable.

Those are the stories we love to tell, and what Jesus says in the parable is, "*You know what? This experience is the ultimate true story! Evil is real. We are in a struggle, we are in a battle. But God has the last word. Good will win and triumph over evil in the end.*"

Which leaves us with a third question raised by the parable, and, in a sense, it's the central question of the parable: *what are we to do in the mean time*? What are we to do in the mean time? How are we to live our lives in the midst of this world in which this struggle is going on? Maybe we're going to be overcome by it. Maybe we need to fight it. And if we're to fight it how are we to fight it?

Well the answer to that question is partly told in this parable and partly told in some other parables.

In other parables what we learn is this (e.g., Matt. 25:1-46); that when it comes to fighting evil we've been called primarily to fight evil first of all within ourselves, to be responsible for ourselves, to enter into this struggle and to fight that fight with all our might – to fight that fight until evil is destroyed.

- Jesus says in the sermon on the mount (Matt. 5:48) “Be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect.”
- The admonition to the people of ancient Israel (Leviticus 20:26) is “Be holy for I am holy.”

This is a fight that we are to fight to the uttermost in ourselves. If judgment is the day when evil will be destroyed, it is also the day in which all of us are called to give an account of our lives to God – every single one of us is personally responsible to God.

Many people don't like to speak about judgment. It seems like a scary idea – and I suppose it is. But it's also a wonderful idea which gives dignity to your life and my life. God doesn't say to us, “*Your life is meaningless. It doesn't add up to anything. You're just a puppet on a string.*” No! God says to you and me, “*I have given you your life. And I have enabled you to make choices that count, decisions that matter. And one day I will ask you about those decisions. And you need to live your life knowing that.*”

Think of it this way. There are athletes and there are musicians who spend their lives practicing and practicing and practicing. They get up early in the morning and they practice all the day long. Is it just because of the joy of practice? Well some enjoy it, there's no question about it. But no it's not. It's because there is a big day coming! It could be the Olympic Games. It could be a concert. It could be Center Court, playing tennis. Or something else – but there's a day coming, a judgment day, when everything you do will be out in the open, on display, *and as a musician or an athlete, you live for that day*. Fearful and scary, yes, but it is the climax, in a positive sense, of everything you've been doing as an athlete or a musician. It's the concert. It's the game. It's the playoff. It's the games.

And God's judgment is like that. And we've been called to live our lives in this world in which there's this battle, this struggle, knowing that this day is coming when evil will be destroyed, and we will stand before our maker. And our maker will say “*Well, what did you choose to do?*” And scary as it is, with Jesus at our side we may well say “*Well, we didn't do everything we ought to have done. But we entered the battle with Jesus leading the way and this is what happened.*” In a sense that will be a glorious day. And God will say to us “*Well done good and faithful servant.*”

Personally we are to enter this battle and resist evil as it were to perfection. Jesus teaches this elsewhere. But what Jesus says *in this* story is that when we enter into the battle in the rest of the world, in this place where there is good seed and there is bad seed, *if we enter the battle in the rest of this world and try to the uttermost to destroy evil, we will end up doing more harm than*

good. It's paradoxical, but we will end up doing more harm than good. So he says, DON'T DO IT!!

And, I think we can see that he's right! Isn't it true that when we pursue evil to the uttermost in society that we tend to forget that we too are sinners! That there is this sin and imperfection within our own lives too. All too easily the quest for perfect righteousness turns into a cruelty and a wickedness, and a self-righteousness even when we are doing it in the service of God.

The history of Israel, and the history of the church are filled with the unintended, and often awful consequences of pursuing evil in the world to the uttermost.

Think of witch hunts, think of Inquisitions, think of pogroms, think of ethnic cleansing, think of apartheid – so often based on what somebody perceived was the teaching of scripture. In pursuing righteousness to perfection in society, and forgetting our own imperfection we tend to end up with callousness and lovelessness and evil more often worse than the evil in those we want “to fix”!

Beware, says Jesus, of perfection when you move to the world outside yourself. In yourself, yes, fight it to the end! Until your life reflects the life of God made known in Christ. But in others, the fight is through kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, and patience. Be salt, be light, be love. Be merciful!

Let me give you an illustration – a risky illustration to give in a congregation in which no doubt there are divided opinions about how this works in society. Jesus' admonition works not only in religion, morality and theology, but, I think, in every political ideology that we carry with us as well. Carry our ideologies of any kind to an extreme and our intent will almost inevitably backfire.

Think for example about our diverse opinions here in this room about rules and regulations: about more regulation and about less regulation. What are we going to do with these competing ideas? Carry either to an extreme and an unintended consequence will follow. Too much regulation, or too little.

Phillip Howard (author of a little book called *The Death of Common Sense*¹) tells a great story about too much regulation – back in 1988. He says that at that time Mother Theresa was looking for a place through her Sisters of Charity to provide a homeless shelter in New York City. The Sisters of Charity were literally wandering through the city on a snowy day looking for buildings that were run down and weren't being used. They were successful, finding a couple of buildings which they discovered belonged to the City of New York. The buildings had been in a fire and had not been restored. The Sisters had \$500,000 with which they wanted to renovate the buildings, and the City of New York was delighted; in fact, so delighted that they agreed to sell the buildings for \$1 to the Sisters of Charity, at which point they entered into negotiations about the restoration. The negotiation lasted a year and a half – a year and a half to get through all the regulations. And in the end it all fell through. The Sisters of Charity didn't want washing machines, they didn't want air conditioners and they didn't want an elevator in the building. They said “we don't believe in these things, we don't use these things and we don't have the money to do these things.” And the city said “there is no flexibility here. No elevator, no shelter.” And the Sisters walked away. No homeless shelter, nothing, because of regulation.

It's extreme case – true! That's the point! All the way over to the extreme. So let me take the pendulum and swing it all the way back to the other extreme.

Maybe you've been listening to the news this week, hearing what's happening in Bangladesh. In the past seven or eight years something like 500 men and women have died in factory buildings either because of fire or because they collapsed – buildings in which people were making the clothes that you and I wear, and that we want to buy for as little money as possible. No rules, no regulations, this is Wednesday's Associated Press report from Bangladesh.

“Rescuers try to free dozens of people believed trapped in the concrete rubble after an eight story building that housed garment factories collapsed killing at least 87. Workers had complained about cracks in the structure before they came tumbling but were assured it was safe. Searchers cut holes in the jumbled mess of concrete with drills or their bare hands passing water and flashlights to those pinned inside the building near Bangladesh's capitol of Dacha. The disaster came less than five months after a factory fire killed 112 people and underscored the unsafe conditions in Bangladesh's massive garment industry.”

Thank God for building codes! Or not? Do you see what happens at either extreme? Indeed all kinds of evil is perpetrated in the name of good in all kinds of areas of life when we as fallible human beings pursue a perfection that we are not capable of ourselves. This is what Jesus teaches in this parable, the wheat and the weeds: *“Know what? Namby pamby as it may seem, when it comes to eradicating evil, I mean eradicating, going to the extreme, that's God's business. We're to fight it yes, and in ourselves to the uttermost. But in the world, the dilemmas will remain until the end. But know this: God will sort it out. Evil is real but God will win.”*

And when we hold onto that, we will find God's path through this field becoming clear to us in this world. We may say “Does that mean there's a certain amount of compromise here?” To which I think Jesus would say “Yes!” And then we'd say, “Jesus tell us more.” And you know what Jesus does as he tells the story? He says Another time! That's all for now. Pray about it. Think about it. Talk about it with one another and see if more of his path in the particular part of the field you are in, will become clear in the days ahead.

Wheat, tares, bad, good, evil exists. It will not win. In ourselves fight to the uttermost. In the world not so easy says Jesus. Be salt and light and love.

1. Philip K. Howard. *The Death of Common Sense: How Law is Suffocating America* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 1996).

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